

VZCZCXRO4397
RR RUEHBI
DE RUEHLM #0383 0690443
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 100443Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2809
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 9013
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 5902
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 3938
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 9379
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 6447
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4388
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1080

UNCLAS COLOMBO 000383

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: USCIRF VISIT TO SRI LANKA

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Members of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) visited Sri Lanka February 23-25 and met with religious, political, and civil society leaders to get a sense of the overall human rights situation as well as to discuss reports of unethical conversions, share concerns about proposed anti-conversion legislation, and follow up on reports of attacks on religious minorities. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) USCIRF Commissioners Michael Cromartie, Felice Gaer, and Preeta Bansal, accompanied by Commission staff members Joseph Crapa and Patricia Carley, met with representatives of the Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities in Sri Lanka during a February 23-25 visit. Members of the Buddhist monk-based Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party discussed the anti-conversion legislation they had tried to introduce in 2005, citing "unethical conversions" as the impetus without being able to provide specific instances. (Note: The proposed legislation lapsed in parliament without being discussed. End note.) Hindu and Muslim interlocutors expressed concerns about being marginalized as minorities, but did not register complaints of religious discrimination. Members of various Christian sects were worried about recent attacks on churches and pastors.

¶3. (SBU) The Commissioners met with an Assemblies of God pastor in Ambalangoda, south of Colombo, who had been attacked in 2005. They also visited the Dutch Reformed Church of Galle, where another pastor said members of his congregation have received anonymous letters threatening the pastor's life. The pastor in Ambalangoda felt local police were not doing enough to assist him, but the pastor in Galle seemed confident about law enforcement efforts to investigate the threats on his life.

¶4. (SBU) The Commissioners also held discussions with NGO representatives to learn whether accusations of unethical conversions had hindered their efforts at providing aid after the December 2004 tsunami. Only World Vision reported some problems in that arena, but added that once they clarified their guidelines on not linking aid to proselytism, they encountered no further problems.

¶5. (SBU) In addition, the Commissioners met with officials at the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Justice, the Solicitor General's office, and with a Supreme Court justice. All government officials assessed that anti-conversion legislation would not move forward. The officials also underscored Sri Lanka's long history of religious harmony, acknowledging isolated incidents of attacks on religious minority groups but expressing confidence that current law

enforcement efforts were adequate to address the problem.

16. (U) This cable was drafted after the Commissioners left Sri Lanka.

LUNSTEAD